TERRORISM AND WAR

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Category: Opinions

Prof. Alan Whitehorn, Kingston, ON, December 14, 2023

We seem to be living in polarized and acrimonious times, and about which, I offer a few personal reflections.

I remember the day of my intense emotional reactions to the Al-Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, as I was coming out of the hospital in Kingston, Ontario. The live scenes on TV were quite horrific, as the Manhattan twin towers collapsed. A massive cloud of debris and dust darkened the New York day and fostered a sombre mood around much of the globe. I, like so many others, was distraught. It was a moment I will never forget. Even a month later, it felt nightmarish. A year later, the memorials were profoundly sad and moving, as I watched the widows and fatherless children mourn their enormous loss. Two decades on, I continue to reflect on the many lives lost in New York on that grim September day. I also greatly mourn the multitude of subsequent dead civilians in the American-led wars that followed in Afghanistan and Iraq in the hunt to locate and destroy the terrorist organizational structures and leadership.

The magnitude of the property loss and number of deaths of innocent civilians was so much more than I would have envisioned. One of my brightest and best former RMC students died in Afghanistan. Shortly thereafter, I stood on a cold and damp spring day on the tarmac at the Trenton military airport, as I tearfully awaited with others for the repatriation of the young Canadian soldier's body. It was a profoundly mournful day. With time, the way in which I write about 9/11 and its aftermath have changed in significant ways. The attack on New York was brutally violent and horrific. I still feel that, although time has lessened the sense of shock. But the violence that followed after that September day was even more deadly and catastrophic. It seems that we live in a more insecure and less confident world. It is a calamitous regional and global history and, in some ways, its bitter legacy is still unfolding.

My initial reaction to the Hamas October 7th attack on southern Israel was that of an academic who has been following closely and written extensively about the recent brutal genocidal wars in both the South Caucasus and Ukraine. Still, I was surprised by the magnitude of the Hamas attack and the large number of dead and captured Israeli civilians. The inclusion of so many targeted women, children and the elderly clearly breached the conventional norms of the laws of war and were crimes against humanity. The Jewish community, both in Israel and the Diaspora, was in enormous shock.

The inevitable Israeli military response was to target the Hamas organization, but also has involved massive shelling and bombing of public buildings and Palestinian family dwellings in the tiny and overly crowded enclave of Gaza. The northern portion of Gaza is now a devastated war zone. All too quickly many thousands of Palestinians are dead and vast numbers of refugees were forced to flee south towards Egypt, where tragically they were confronted with a largely closed border and little humanitarian aid being actually available. Nor are they safe from further shelling and bombing.

International legal experts, UN officials and humanitarian NGO leaders are warning about the unfolding catastrophe. We are still only in the opening months of the current war in Gaza. It already seems to be spilling over elsewhere in the Middle East. I suspect that worse may yet come in such a conflict-filled region where there is so much animosity, lack of good will and so much weaponry.

Meanwhile, the numbers of refugees and dead also continue to climb in both Ukraine and Armenia. As an academic and human rights specialist, I try to understand, as best as I can. I attempt to do what is feasible, albeit from afar. Too often, I can only offer a symbolic tearful hug to those who lost loved ones from such violent events. I am the grandson of an orphan of the Armenian Genocide whose grandmother lived in refugee camps and orphanages for over a decade. I know all too well how such pain and suffering can endure for generations to come. We live in a world of conflict, but do hope that peace and justice will eventually prevail. But it will require many more of us to resist the 'sin of indifference'.

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Alan Whitehorn is an emeritus professor of political science at the Royal Military College of Canada and a former JS Woodsworth Chair in Humanities at Simon Fraser University. He is the author of several books on genocide and war, including ***The Armenian Genocide: The Essential Reference Guide*** *(2015) and* ***Karabakh Diary: Poems from the Diaspora/Gharabaghyan Oragir: banasteghcutyunner Spyurqic*** *(2022).*

Comments

Sean – 2023-12-21 17:05:11
As a Canadian follower of your website I have learned a lot about inhuman treatments throughout the world through Prof. Whitehorn's writings. Thank you. I am also pleased to see his name in your excellent expose "Villains and Heroes" under the column of heroes.



Keith Garebian – 2023-12-20 10:41:35
The West, especially the United States, will have a heavy price to pay for generations because of Israel and demonic Netanyahu's war crimes against the Palestinians! Israeli far-right wing extremists have become neo-Nazis. What a disgusting irony!